

Conclusions

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While reporting fewer cases than other, harder-hit, regions such as Europe, the Middle East and North Africa region is likely to be equally impacted by the long-term consequences of the pandemic.

The reason for the relatively low number of cases reported has been attributed alternatively to a warmer climate (even though there is no scientific proof of a correlation between outside temperature and the possibility of contracting the virus) and a significantly younger population, which presents less symptoms and less long-term consequences than older people who instead make up most of the European population. Another reason for the low numbers is believed to be underreporting, whether intentional or due to a lack of preparedness and ability to test.

Among the countries analyzed in this Report, Iran is without doubt the one that is paying the highest price, with about 600,000 reported cases and more than 30,000 deaths at the end of October. Iraq too is reporting one of the highest number of cases in the region (500,000, with 10,000 deaths), which is likely due to its geographical proximity to and high number of daily exchanges with Iran. As for North African countries, Egypt reported about 107,000 cases with 2,000 deaths, while Libya and Algeria declared very similar numbers (60,000 cases with 1,000 deaths for Libya and 2,000 deaths for Algeria). In the GCC, Saudi Arabia is the country most affected, with 346,000 reported cases and more than 5,000 deaths, followed by Qatar (132,000 cases and 230 deaths), the UAE (130,000

cases and 500 deaths), Kuwait (123,000 cases and 800 deaths), Oman (115,000 cases and 1,200 deaths), and Bahrain (81,000 cases and 317 deaths).

Despite apparently being less hard-hit, the actual impact and consequences of the pandemic on states in the MENA region are set to be huge. Of course, it is not possible to make generalizations for the whole region, which remains as heterogenous as ever: MENA countries differ in terms of GDP and health infrastructures, and some of them suffer from political instability and sometimes violent conflicts.

Exactly as with humans, which are hit hardest when presenting pre-existing conditions, MENA states have been impacted because of their pre-existing conditions. In this sense, the Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare all the vulnerabilities and deficiencies of these states' structures, and has aggravated pre-existing political, social, and economic shortcomings.

While the impact, and the possible consequences, of the pandemic are different for each state, some common features can be highlighted:

- By failing to provide an adequate response to the pandemic, states' authorities are experiencing a further loss in legitimacy, which adds to the pre-existing contestation and risks of giving rise to a further wave of protests.
- In many regional states, protests were already underway and have only been stopped by the pandemic and the government-imposed curfews and social distancing measures. Despite a short-term gain in time for governments, they are much likely to explode again once the virus has been contained, this time fueled by the grievances highlighted above and by the precipitating economic crisis.
- Many governments in the region have been using the emergency powers granted by the need to manage the pandemic to further crack down on domestic opposition and strengthen anti-terrorism laws, ultimately curbing fundamental freedoms. Again, while these

measures give an advantage to political regimes in the short term, they are likely to be met with further discontent over the medium term.

- As elsewhere, the pandemic has strengthened and increased the role of the state, but in the MENA region it happens at a time in which the state is under growing pressure both from its citizens and by non-state actors, exactly for its lack of ability to manage ordinary life.
- Partial exemption to these dynamics are the GCC states, where there is no organized, grassroots opposition to ruling governments, and where the huge financial resources these states have access to could help in softening the economic impact of the pandemic over the short term. However, for GCC states, too, the crisis looms on the horizon, as the double shock due to the collapse of oil prices and Covid-19 has renewed the urgency of achieving economic diversification and, with it, a reform of the social compact, transitioning away from the Arab authoritarian compact based on the principle of “no taxation without representation.”

There is a lively debate going on about whether the pandemic is a geopolitical game-changer or a mere accelerator of dynamics that were already underway. For the MENA region, we can say that for the moment it is significantly revealing all the cracks in the states' structures, and over the next months this could translate into an acceleration of those dynamics of protest and contestation that were already rife before the pandemic started.

Ten years after the Arab Spring, a second wave of uprisings, which took off in 2019 and has only temporarily been halted by the pandemic, is about to regain full steam. Protests in Algeria and Iraq have already resumed. In Egypt, too, rare protests against the government have been launched, despite the harsh wave of arrests sparked by the 2019 protests. Libya has been witnessing widespread and nationwide protests since August. In the Persian Gulf region, for the moment there is no report

of mass protests, but smoldering discontent can soon reignite another wave of demonstrations in Iran, while in the GCC countries discontent will probably continue to be voiced online.

As the pandemic-induced crisis is expected to exacerbate poverty and inequalities, the poor response by state authorities and the strengthening of authoritarian practices is most likely to amplify dynamics and reasons for discontent, thus transforming the coronavirus crisis from a health crisis into an economic and political one.